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VERBAL TABOOS

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A taboo, in the words of the dictionary, is a prohibition laid by primitive peoples upon certain objects or acts. It is a ban, curse, or interdiction, of such a character that anyone who touches the tabooed object or performs the tabooed act, is liable to a penalty. Among different races the taboo is applied to many different things, as to persons, implements, places, food, and garments; but the most interesting phase of it, at any rate the phase to which I would here direct special attention, is its application to spoken words. The general character of this kind of taboo is thus indicated by Tylor in his *Early History of Mankind*:

A man will not utter his own name; husband and wife will not utter one another's names; the son- or daughter-in-law will not mention the name of the father- or mother-in-law, and vice versa; the names of chiefs may not be uttered, nor the names of certain other persons, nor of superhuman beings, nor of animals and things to which supernatural powers are ascribed.

From the many examples of such taboos in Tylor's work, the following, quoted from the Jesuit missionary Dobrizhoffer, is perhaps the most significant:

The Abiponian language [the Abipones were a tribe of South American Indians, now extinct] is involved in new difficulties by a ridiculous custom which the savages have of continually abolishing words common to the whole nation, and substituting new ones in their stead. Funeral rites are the origin of this custom. The Abipones do not like that anything should remain to remind them of the dead. Hence appellative words bearing any affinity with

the name of the deceased are presently abolished. During the first years that I spent among the Abipones, it was usual to say *Hegmalkam kahamatek?* "When will there be a slaughtering of oxen?" On account of the death of some Abipone, the word *kahamatek* was interdicted, and, in its stead, they were all commanded, by the voice of a crier, to say *Hegmalkam negerkata?*

In like manner, the writer goes on to say, were prohibited the words for crocodile and tiger because in the Abiponian language these words bore some resemblance to names of persons who were recently deceased.

A custom at once so inconvenient and so irrational, one usually thinks of as existing only among primitive races; it is interesting, therefore, to note that the same practice or something strikingly akin to it, prevails in the most highly civilized communities, where interdictions—not to speak of bans and curses—are imposed as arbitrarily as they were among the Abipones. An illustration will help to make this clear.

Of the books that have appeared within the past three decades in this country and in England, a considerable proportion have dealt in whole or in part with the subject of English usage. One of these, entitled *Don't*, which came out in 1883 and passed through many editions, consisted of a series of prohibitions laid upon various acts and customs under penalty of exclusion from polite society. So far as its interdictions dealt with such matters as eating peas with one's knife or wearing a dressing-gown at an evening party, that is, so far as they were a reflection of current social opinion, the book was not especially noteworthy; but several of its mandates, especially those regarding matters of English usage, went beyond this limit. The following examples will illustrate:

Don't say **vest** for **waistcoat**;¹

Don't say **rubbers**, say **overshoes**;

Don't say **sick** except when nausea is meant.

Prohibitions such as these do not differ materially from those noted above; that is, they are arbitrary commands to cease from the use of certain words that are common to a whole nation. These prohibitions are, then, verbal taboos of the civilized type.

Other examples of the verbal taboo may be found in the once

¹ The *International Dictionary* still taboos *vest*, although *waistcoat*, the only alternative, is to the great body of Americans as bookish as *glebe*.

highly popular writings of Richard Grant White. From the twenty-third edition of his *Words and Their Uses* I quote the following passages:

Restive means standing stubbornly still, not frisky, as some people seem to think it does. A restive horse is a horse that balks [p. 152].

Presidential. This adjective, which is used among us now more frequently than any other not vituperative, laudatory, or boastful, is not a legitimate word. Carelessness or ignorance has saddled it with an *i*, which is "on the wrong horse." . . . The proper form is **presidential**, as that of the adjectives formed upon **tangent** and **exponent** is **tangential** and **exponential**. **Presidential**, **tangential**, and **exponential** are a trinity of monsters which, although they have not been wholly lovely in their lives, should yet in their death be not divided [p. 217].

Stand-point, whatever the channel of its coming into use, is of the sort to which the vulgar words **wash-tub**, **shoe-horn**, **brew-house**, **cook-stove**, and **go-cart** belong, the first four of which are merely slovenly and uncouth abbreviations of **washing-tub**, **shoeing-horn**, **brewing-house**, and **cooking-stove**, the last being a nursery word, a counterpart to which would be **rock-horse** instead of **rocking-horse** [p. 232].

In other places Mr. White attempts to taboo the use of **telegram**, **reliable**, **depot** for **station**, **railroad** for **railway**, and **to observe** in the sense of **to remark**.

Of more recent works on English usage a little book entitled *The Verbalist* has had perhaps the widest circulation. It contains many examples of the taboo. The reader is forbidden to use **all the same** for **nevertheless** (p. 6), **I have all of them** for **I have them all** (p. 6), **consider** in the sense of **suppose** (p. 54), **a bad cold** for **a severe cold**, and **lunch** for **luncheon**. The author even interdicts the use of **done** in the sentence, "He did not cry out, as some have **done**, against it," which should read, he says, "He did not cry out as some have, against it."

A work by Mr. G. M. Tucker entitled *Our Common Speech* also contains interesting examples. Mr. Tucker would eliminate from the English vocabulary the verbs **dissever** and **unravel** and the adjective **lesser**. **Preposterous** he thinks should be used only in its etymological sense of hindsides-before, never in the sense of **absurd**. A like judgment is passed upon the adjective **impertinent**.

An impertinent remark [says Mr. Tucker] is one that has no connection with the matter under discussion. But the use of the term ought not to be thought to imply any censure on the good manners of the speaker referred to,

for the most courteous person in the world makes an impertinent remark whenever he introduces a new topic of conversation. To call a person "impertinent," in any case, is to "mix" things badly. A person can no more be "impertinent" than he can be irrelevant or disconnected [p. 23].

More significant than the foregoing, because coming from a more authoritative source, are the taboos published by the late Professor A. S. Hill, of Harvard University, in his school textbooks, *The Foundations of Rhetoric* and *The Principles of Rhetoric*. If we obey the injunctions of these books, we shall no longer speak of anything as being **a success**; we shall speak of it as being **successful** (*Foundations*, p. 52); we shall cease saying **an editorial**, and in its place say **an editorial article**, or **a leader** (p. 59); we shall not think of the barn as being **back of** the house, but as being **behind** the house (p. 143). According to Professor Hill we must not say "The United States is a nation," we must say "The United States **are** a nation." The preposition "onto" (or "on to") is strictly forbidden. It is wrong to say "We climbed out of the window onto the roof of the porch." Instead the sentence should read "We climbed out of the window on the roof (or to the roof) of the porch." **To gesture**, according to Professor Hill, is a verb which is not a verb (p. 115). The sentence: "A beautiful doll came out and gestured solemnly," is corrected to read: "A beautiful doll came out and gesticulated solemnly." Finally, the verb **laundered** is condemned (*Principles*, p. 34) as a vulgar substitute for **washed and ironed**.

The number of recent books of this class is so great that it would be easy to fill the remainder of the paper with their titles and their lists of prohibited expressions.¹ But the examples already cited are sufficient, I trust, to make clear the general nature of the phenomenon under discussion. I wish now to inquire into its origin. Why should any user of the English language

¹ I may add the following interesting comment on *had better*, taken from a brightly written little handbook intended as a guide for the reporters and copyreaders of a leading metropolitan newspaper: "This expression for 'would better' or 'might better,' as in 'I had better starve than do anything dishonorable,' although formerly of good repute, is falling into deserved disuse. 'Had starve' is grammatically impossible, and the addition of 'better' helps the case not at all. The use of 'had better' nowadays is confined to literary reactionaries and 'standpatters,' to the careless and to the ignorant."

feel called upon to vilify a harmless, necessary word such as **launder** in the sense of **wash and iron**, or **reliable** in the sense of **trustworthy**, or **impertinent** in the sense of **insolent**? What was Professor Hill's motive in endeavoring to banish from our speech the useful noun **editorial**? Why should Mr. Tucker recoil from the word **preposterous**, and the editor of *The Verbalist* from the expression **a bad cold**?

These are hard questions, even for the writers themselves. Nevertheless I will venture an answer.

Verbal taboos are the outcome of a class of human feelings to which may be given the general name "antipathies." Feelings of this class are so instinctive, deep-seated, and (usually) unreasoning that their origin is often regarded as mysterious, or at least as hopelessly obscure. They may be divided into two classes: First, normal (or social) antipathies, those which we share with the great majority of our fellows—such, for example, as the common antipathy to snakes and to disgusting spectacles; and, second, abnormal antipathies, which are peculiar to an individual and are exaggerated in intensity.

Of the second class, with which we are here chiefly concerned, the most striking antipathies are those directed against the lower animals. Shylock, it will be recalled, in excuse of his inhumanity to Antonio, says:

Some men there are love not a gaping pig,
Some that are mad if they behold a cat.

Napoleon, it is said, had an antipathy to white dogs. Dean Swift tells us that Bolingbroke, when he cast his eyes upon "a poor harmless toad," acted like one bereft of his senses. Ambroise Paré had a patient who would faint at the sight of an eel, and another who was convulsed on seeing a carp. Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer, abhorred foxes; Henry III of France, cats, mice, and spiders; and Marshal d'Albret, pigs. Erasmus was made feverish by the smell of fish.

Besides the lower animals, many other classes of objects have had this power to arouse unreasoning aversion. Mme. de Stael could not endure the sight of the rising full moon. It is said that Dickens had an aversion to stiff shirt bosoms, and Agassiz to pol-

ished steel. Louis XIV hated the sight of barefooted children. Disraeli had an attack of vertigo when he saw anyone chewing gum—one could wish that this antipathy were more widely dispersed—and Buffon flew into a rage if anyone put an egg on the dining table at which he sat. A king of France and a secretary of Poland bled at the nose if offered apples. And Boyle, the Irish philosopher, was overcome at hearing the splashing of water.¹

But antipathies are directed not only toward men, animals, and inanimate objects; what is more to our purpose, they are also directed against words. As Molière makes Armande say in *Les femmes savantes*:²

Par une antipathie ou juste, ou naturelle,
Nous avons pris chacune une haine mortelle
Pour un nombre de mots, soit ou verbes ou noms,
Que mutuellement nous nous abandonnons.

“Rationally or irrationally,” wrote Newman to Professor Earle, “I have an undying, never-dying hatred to **is being** (in such a connection as ‘the house is being built’), whatever arguments are brought in its favour.” In the same spirit, Mr. William Matthews, in *Words, Their Use and Abuse*, writes regarding the word **anyhow**: “An exceedingly vulgar phrase. Its use in any manner, by one who professes to write and speak the English tongue with propriety, is unpardonable.” Lowell speaks of “that abominable word **reliable**,” and Professor Genung of “the wretched word **enthuse**.”³ “My pet aversion,” wrote Professor William James in a private letter, “is **postal card** for **post card**.”

How do these verbal antipathies arise? An answer to this question may suggest itself if we consider for a moment the nature of speech and the process of acquiring it.

Speech is the system of vocal sounds by means of which men express their thoughts and feelings and hold communication one with another. How this system originated we do not clearly

¹ Most of these examples are taken from the *Popular Science Monthly*, Vol. XXVII, p. 137. I do not vouch for the statements.

² Act III, scene ii. I am indebted to my colleague, Professor J. R. Effinger, for this apt citation.

³ I do not mean to defend the use of this word, but simply to call attention to the mental attitude implied in the adjective “wretched.”

know. Probably, as Wallace has tried to demonstrate,¹ it is a survival of acts and attitudes of primitive man which were the natural accompaniments of his primitive emotions. But whether this hypothesis be true or not, speech, as we now find it, is largely conventional, that is, it consists of signs which have little or no apparent relation to the things for which they stand, or the ideas which they express. Into a society employing such a system each one of us is born, and no inconsiderable part of our lives is spent in connecting together sign and idea and sign and thing in the way upon which society has agreed.

To the infant child the words of the mother or the nurse are at first, we may suppose, on a par with all other sounds that strike his attention, such as the slamming of doors, the creaking of shoe-soles, the ticking of the clock, or the rumble of wagons in the street. All are alike strange and new, and can hardly be said to be either pleasant or unpleasant to him, except in so far as they arouse (according to one authority)² a vague sense of fear. But in course of time he learns to discriminate between the sounds which come from the street and those which are made by the curious, moving, breathing objects which flit in and out of his field of vision. The sounds that these beings emit have some special reference to himself. He hears them over and over again under the same conditions, and some few, which are associated with the most intense and most habitual experiences of his little round of daily life, he soon learns by imitation to pronounce; but only by slow and sometimes painful advances does the child learn to connect with these sounds the things and ideas which they convey to his elders. His first impressions are likely to be wide of the mark. Since the words he hears are uttered under complex conditions the particulars of which he is unable as yet to distinguish clearly, the sounds may seem to him to be connected with some source of pleasure or of pain with which, in reality, the relation is purely accidental. Thus a child who is warned not to touch a tea-pot because it will burn, thereafter calls all kinds of pots, vases, pitchers, and cups, "burnies"; or, upon hearing a boy ringing a bell and being told

¹ "The Expressiveness of Speech," *Fortnightly Magazine*, Vol. LVIII, N.S., p. 528.

² Perez, *Psychologie de l'enfant*, pp. 72-74.

that it is "Donald," attaches the term "donoo" to the sound of all bells, and even to all kinds of loud and (to him) pleasing noises.

Sometimes a word becomes by mere chance so closely associated with a certain irrelevant thing that for the rest of the individual's life the sound of the word calls up a mental image of the thing. A curious example of this is seen in the phenomenon known to psychologists as pseudochromaesthesia or "color-hearing," that is, the association of sensations of sound with sensations of color. Thus to a child nine years of age, examined by an instructor in psychology at Columbia University, the word **Maria** was associated with yellow, **Katherine** with red, **Mary** with white, **Wednesday** with dark orange, **Sunday** with bright yellow, **August** with hay color, **hurt** with brown, and **pert** with black. Each letter of the alphabet and each of the Arabic numerals had for this child its appropriate color.¹

Other influences may operate upon the child to give to a word or expression a meaning different from that which is attached to it by his elders. If the word is hard for him to pronounce; if it is associated with persons whom he does not like; if it has a chance resemblance to another word that is connected with painful reminiscences; if it has been heard in connection with some startling experience which produced a nervous shock and left a permanent impression upon the childish mind—if any one of these things happens, the word in question may thereafter be to the child a hateful word; and this quite independently of any denotation that the word may acquire later. It may, therefore, occur, and as a matter of fact does frequently occur, that the child has personal feelings toward particular words and expressions which are not shared by the remainder of the human species. He likes certain words and dislikes other words in a quite arbitrary way. He has, so to speak, his own private vocabulary.

This personal, private attitude toward certain words may be illustrated by an experiment which I made with one of my classes. I asked each student to describe, impromptu, the images that were aroused in his mind by the word **pimpernel**, in the line from Tennyson's *Maud*,

The pimpernel dozed on the lea.

¹ *Psychological Review*, Vol. III, p. 92.

Since the word was unknown to virtually all the members of the class, it is obvious that whatever meaning they attached to it was a personal, private meaning, derived from its sound, from its connection with the word "dozed" in the context, or from chance associations. In other words, the attitude of the student toward the word **pimpernel** was similar to that of the infant child toward the words **papa** and **mama** upon hearing these words for the first time¹. I will quote a few of the reports:

1. The word pimpernel calls up in my mind the image of a pampered cur. He is a worthless brute who spends most of his time sleeping in the warm sunshine.

2. The pimpernel seems to me to be a small animal resembling an eel. It has short, rounded ears, and bright, beadlike eyes. As I imagine it, the pimpernel is lying half-asleep in the grass near the shore of a lake, ready to slip into the water at the slightest sound.

3. A pimpernel seems to me to be a tramp or gypsy. He lies on the bank in the sun with an old, battered hat drawn over his face.

4. I do not know what the word means, but it instantly suggests to me a small lizard covered with pimples or warts. The image flashed upon my mind as soon as the word was spoken and is still vivid and distinct. Although I never heard the word before, I seem always to have known it and to have attached this meaning to it. I am absurdly confident that this is the true meaning.

Other students conceived of a pimpernel as a frog, as a small deer, as a dragon-fly, and as a small tree or shrub like a prickly pear.

If it is now clear from these examples how easily verbal antipathies may arise, we have next to inquire how many words of this character are to be found in the individual vocabulary and of what classes they are.

In order to answer these questions I undertook some little time ago a rather extensive investigation, the results of which I now propose to give. In the pursuit of this inquiry about a thousand persons were interrogated, but the results given in this paper are based upon the reports of only two hundred and fifty, these reports having been selected from the total number, not with reference to their contents, but because they were written by persons in whose good faith, frankness, and powers of introspection I could put full

¹ The term "pimpernel" denotes, I need hardly say, a small red or purple flower which grows wild in some parts of this country and in England; but only three members of the class were aware of this.

confidence. Each subject was asked to make a list of the words which were particularly displeasing to him, and to state the reasons for his dislike.

Five of the subjects, or 2 per cent, after a thorough exploration of their mental furniture, could discover, much to their regret, no antipathies whatever. The same percentage prevails in the remaining reports.

The total number of words given in the two hundred and fifty reports, including repetitions, is 1,334. The average number of hated words to each individual is, therefore, a little over five.

The reasons given by the subjects for their antipathies may be classified under four principal heads. Words are disliked, first, because the sound is displeasing; second, because the spelling or the appearance of the word on the written or printed page is an offense to the eye; third, because the word when heard or read arouses unpleasing images; and fourth, because at some previous time, generally in early childhood, the word became associated with a painful incident, or with some person whom the subject disliked. The last two reasons, being closely related, may be treated as phases of a single phenomenon.

I will first consider antipathies to sounds. Certain combinations of vowels and consonants strike some ears as unidiomatic of the language. The pronunciation **progr'm** for **programme** is characterized by one subject as a barbarous combination of noises, affecting him somewhat like a grunt. It does not seem to him to be part of the English language. In the same list belong **unconscionable** and **ratiocination**. Others object for similar reasons to the participles **drunk** and **swum** in the formation of the perfect tense. "The preterite **flung**," says one writer, "does not sound grammatical to me. **Flang** is, for the instant just before I pronounce it, not only more satisfying but seemingly more idiomatic."

Another class of words is offensive because the sounds lack character. The sound of **helpmeet** is described as flat and sickish, of **grab-bag** as colorless and faded. **Amiable**, **spoliation**, and **acquiesce** have for certain persons no individuality. The word **widower** strikes several as a feminine, ridiculous sort of word. A considerable number of persons hate the plural form **women**, as being weak and whimper-

ing, though the singular **woman**, connotes for the same persons ideas of strength and nobility. It is for this reason perhaps that **woman's building, woman's college, woman's club**, and the like, have supplanted in popular speech the forms **women's building, women's college**, etc. It is noteworthy also that in the titles of magazines and names of women's clubs the singular in most instances has displaced the more logical plural.

Disappointment of the sense for rhythm is responsible for a further class of aversions. Thus **adjunct** and **adopt** seem to bring the writer up with a jerk. On the other hand the word **equilibrium** is felt by some to be too long. "I always start," says one writer, "to pronounce it **equil'ibrum**." The necessity of suddenly changing the accent gives me great annoyance. I never use the word if I can avoid it." A violent antipathy to **fac-simile** is explained as being due to the impression that "one end of the word is heavier than the other end." The probable reason for this appears in another report, the writer of which states that for a year or two before he heard any one use the word, he always pronounced it, to himself, **fac-smile**.

Some words are objectionable because the sound is not congruous with the sense. They are, so to speak, verbal misfits. Thus **venison**, which to most persons is fairly agreeable, has for one of my subjects a harsh, rasping sound in no way related to its denotation. **Pail** seems to several too frail and unsubstantial a term to be fitly applied to that sturdy thing, a bucket. The sound of the word **jelly** connotes for one unfortunate person a clammy, tasteless substance, and this word, if it is used at the table, takes away his desire, otherwise keen, for the article of food which it denotes.

A curious and interesting class embraces words which are offensive, not in themselves, but because the sounds call up, by association, other sounds or other words. **Chum**, for example, never fails in the case of one subject to call up the croaking of a frog. **Swallow**, for another, is always accompanied by a hollow sound. **Castor**, in **castor-oil**, invariably suggests to one writer a creaking noise, probably because the sound associated with one meaning of the word is carried over to the other meaning. **Pert**

is spoiled for one by the unfailing intrusion of the pronunciation **piert**, with which in childhood he was familiar in the provincial phrase "right **piert**." For another, **pretty** is spoiled by the intrusion of **purty**, and **larynx** by the intrusion of **larnyx**. Of parasitic words there are many singular examples. **Vehicle** to one person suggests **hiccough**, possibly because he has heard the vulgar pronunciation **vehic'le**. To others **impious** suggests **imps**; **rendition**, a tearing or rending; **squeamish**, squirming. An odd association is that of **cadaver** and **skedaddle**, due apparently to nothing more than the similarity of the stressed vowels. One subject has conceived a violent antipathy to **pectoral**, because, whenever he hears it, he sees a picture of apples and plums in which the birds have pecked holes. Many persons will sympathize with one of my subjects in an aversion to **galoshes**, though not perhaps for the same reason. "This word," says the writer, "is highly offensive to me because whenever I begin to pronounce it, I have an uneasy feeling that before I am through with it I will say either **gosh** or **molasses**."

Finally comes a long list of words of which the sound is simply ungrateful to the ears. Such are **lank**, **bosom**, **succinct**, **gamut**, (offensive when spoken but pleasing in print), **sofa**, **discomfit**, **goitre** (the sound of which was disliked before the meaning was known), **emblem**, **squalor**, **squalid**, **fulsome**, and many others. The general character of such antipathies is illustrated by the following note on the word **got**: "I never use this word when I can avoid it. The sound of the **o** is unpleasant. When I open my mouth to say it I contract the muscles of my throat as if I were trying to get rid of something distasteful, and I involuntarily turn up my nose."

A second cause of aversion is found in the spelling. The cases due to this cause, though few in number, are extremely interesting.

In six instances the antipathy is due to a parasitic or phantom word, differently spelled, which starts up in the mind whenever the original word is seen in print or writing. As a general thing the phantom spelling is phonetic. The word **bellows**, for example, is haunted by the phantom **bellus**, **gallows** by **gallus**, **blood** by **blud**, **berry** by **bury**, and **vituals** by **vittles**. The way in which the phantom spelling reacts upon the original word may be illustrated

by a report on the word **beau**. This word, according to one writer, though momentarily pleasing, invariably brings with it the parasitic word **bo**, the effect of which is to make the original "intolerably mawkish."

A parasitic spelling of a different kind appears in connection with the word **dowager**—which to me, by the way, always means a dowdy woman. One subject reports that this word, as soon as his eyes fall upon it, instantly turns into **dwouager**, with a corresponding pronunciation.

Just as the sound may seem to be a mere jumble of noises, so the spelling of a word may seem to be a mere jumble of letters. Such is the word **islet** to one, the word **misled**¹ to another. **Dudgeon** seems to one writer to be lacking in a letter, though he cannot say what the letter is. The spelling of **depot** is offensive, for no ascertainable reason, to a considerable number.

A third cause of antipathies lies in the power of certain words to arouse incongruous or unpleasing images. In some cases this power seems to reside in the sound alone. Thus **girdle** and **gargle** arouse images of a disgusting, semi-fluid substance like gravy; **settle** and **fettle**, of a heavy, quivering, jelly-like mass. **Lobby** calls up the figure of a fat, coarse-looking fellow; **ma'am**, the image of a big mouth. **Grewgious**, a name which Dickens gives to a character in *Edwin Drood*, causes one of the subjects (who has not read the novel) to see a picture of a wry-faced man and to hear the sound of gritted teeth. The word **squeamish**, in several instances, brings up a mental picture of angle-worms on the sidewalk after a rain. **Yam** suggests to one a noisy ticket-seller at a circus; **snobbish**, to another, a mass of slime; **spurious**, to a third, a man kicking a small dog.

In another set of instances, a part of the word by analogy or by a kind of punning suggests some other word. Thus, **lamentable** is made ridiculous by the accompanying picture of a lamb, **melancholy**, by a picture of melons, and **surreptitious**, by a picture of a sticky syrup jar. The managing editor of a New York daily is said to have banished the word **toothsome** from the columns of his paper because it calls up in his mind the image of a large human tooth

¹ Commonly pronounced "mizzled" by young children, and taken to mean struck by a missile.

to which adhere particles of food. Avoidance of the word **mediocre** is in one of the reports traced to an aversion to the color yellow. Why the word **sort** in the phrase, "a good sort of chap," should be obnoxious, was a mystery both to the subject and to the investigator. Nor was the mystery lessened at first by the discovery that the word always evoked an image of rotten apples. Later, however, the picture was found to be of some one "sorting apples," an idea and a phrase with which the writer had become familiar in early childhood; and thus the antipathy was satisfactorily accounted for.

Another example of this round-about connection of word and image is seen in an aversion to the word **demagogue** arising from the accompanying image of a monster. The subject said that for a time he always connected the words **demagogue** and **octopus**, the latter invariably calling up a repulsive image. Later the word octopus, the middle term of the series, dropped away, leaving the image of the monster behind. Thus the demagogue, by a kind of poetic justice, became the victim of his favorite word.

Many images can be traced to unpleasant scenes or incidents in early childhood. **Delicate**, for one person, means a dirty, faded red, because a girl friend, whose dress was of that color, always spoke of it as "a delicate red." **Preamble** is hateful to a student because he read it in one of Burke's orations before he was old enough to understand it.

I have had a peculiar horror [says another writer] of the word **fled** since I was a very small child. I was once riding in the country with my parents when we passed a house which had recently been destroyed by fire. Upon asking where the people were who had lived there, I was told that they had "fled." Being ignorant of the true meaning of the word, I at once connected it with this scene of ruin and desolation. Whenever I hear the word now this unwelcome picture presents itself.

As one might expect, the greater number of images are visual; but auditory, motor, and tactile images are not uncommon. **Salubrious** calls up the sound of someone smacking his lips; **relish**, of someone sipping coffee, or of a darky eating a watermelon; **masticate**, of pigs eating from a trough. **Mackerel** causes a pricking sensation in the skin; **peculiar**, a sensation of curling and twisting; **got**, of the flesh being torn by jagged instruments; **toothless**, of having a tooth pulled; **acerbity**, of drawing the thumb across the

edge of a razor. The sound of the word **noodle** in **noodle-soup** makes the pieces of dough seem to writhe. **Snarl** gives the sensation of snarled silk sticking to the fingers; **toothsome** makes the teeth ache (possibly from association with candy).

The only word [writes a young man] which gives me what some would call "the shudders," that I call to mind just now, is the word **groin**. When I see it in print or hear it pronounced, I have the same feeling one would have when listening to the graphic description of an operation where it is necessary to scrape the bone. If anyone were to tell us of such an operation, no doubt we should say, "I can almost feel it." That is just the way the word **groin** affects me. I can almost feel it, and the peculiar part of it is that the sensation always places itself in my left hip.

The first time I ever saw the word was years ago in a newspaper article about a murder, and it told how the pistol ball entered the groin, etc. I am naturally very easily disturbed by the graphic description of any injury, and as I read it I can almost feel the pain myself; but this seemed to especially affect me; so that I never see the word now, but that I experience a peculiar and disagreeable sympathy which has made me feel a perfect abhorrence for the word. This was not due to my knowing anything about the groin as a part of the anatomy, for until today, when I looked it up, I hadn't the slightest idea where the groin is located. Therefore, I attribute the peculiar sensation the word gives me more to its sound than to any association.

Early misapprehension of the meaning of the word is responsible for several antipathies. Thus one subject for many years was under the impression that **cuticle** was a disease of the skin. Another thought that **the deceased** referred to a person who had died of some loathsome disease.

A majority of the reported antipathies are individual, that is, they are not shared by the remainder of the writers. A considerable number are shared by from three to twelve or fifteen. Only a few words rise to the dignity of public nuisances.

Of these the most interesting is perhaps the word **victuals**. Of the two hundred and fifty persons, eighty-one, or about one-third, report a strong antipathy to this word. In ten cases the aversion is so great that the sound of the word at table takes away the subject's appetite. In investigating the reasons for this antipathy, I made in the case of one student a curious discovery. Having exposed before him for a second or two a card bearing the word in question, I noted that he made no objection to it; but later, when I expressed

surprise that he had accepted the word **victuals** without comment, the young man started. "Vittles," he exclaimed with a visible recoil. "I detest the word." "But you didn't say so when I showed it to you." "But I haven't seen it." I drew out the card and placed it before him. "Oh, vic-tu-als," said he. "That word's all right." It appeared that although the two words had long existed as antonyms in his vocabulary, he had never before discovered their relationship.

Of the total number who feel an antipathy for this word, four reject it because of the parasitic spelling **vittles** or **vittals**, eight dislike the sound, thirty-seven are subject to unpleasing images, and twenty-one are unable to assign any satisfactory reason. The images aroused are worthy of enumeration. Ten saw a mixture or conglomeration of various kinds of food; three, cold boiled potatoes; four, bits of cold food. Other images were of unclean food, food for animals, food in a garbage pail, a string of sausage, a table loaded with unappetizing food, and partly masticated bits of food in the mouth of an untidy person.

Several of the subjects ventured the opinion that the word was never used at all by educated people.¹

The hypothesis upon which I explain the origin of verbal taboos will now be easily guessed. Suppose that in childhood some one has received, from any cause, a strongly unpleasant impression of a word. Suppose that when he grows up his natural aggressiveness of disposition, combined, it may be, with the elements of vanity and self-righteousness which are the endowments of all of us, leads him to assert his own preferences and override those of his fellows. Suppose, finally, that such a person has natural gifts and industry and inclination to scholarship such that he attains to a position of some eminence and acquires the standing of an authority. If we suppose all these things to be true, and the supposition is by no means violent, we shall have no difficulty in imagining such a person as endeavoring to impose his private aversions upon the entire community. We shall not go far astray if we think of Mr.

¹ I may note at this point an aversion of my own that is shared, I find, by others to whom I have mentioned it. I do not like the word s-q-u-a-l-o-r. If pronounced "squaylor," it suggests, in any connection, the squealing of a pig; if pronounced "squahlor," it suggests a squalling infant.

White, and Mr. Tucker, and the editor of *The Verbalist*, as saying to the public, I don't like these words; I never did like them. Therefore, *you* shan't like them, or at any rate you shan't use them."

If this hypothesis be correct, we can explain by it many interdictions which otherwise would be wholly mysterious. For example, Professor A. S. Hill, in his *Principles of Rhetoric*, lays a ban, as I have said, upon the word **launder**, in the sense of **wash and iron**, on the ground that it is a vulgar substitute for an expression in good use. Now this verb, to **launder**, has been in good use in the English language for at least three hundred years. It is used by Shakespeare, by Scott, and by Swinburne, and, as far as I know, no one from the time of Queen Elizabeth down to the date of the appearance of Professor Hill's textbook has ever uttered a word of protest. Why did Professor Hill endeavor to taboo it? I do not know positively, but I can make a guess.

As it happens, certain members of my classes who know nothing about the history of the word, or the fact that any charge has been brought against it, have for it, nevertheless, a strong antipathy. One student says that the sound of **launder**

suggests someone flapping clothes awkwardly in the water. The word seems to be closely associated with the verb **flounder**.

Another writes:

Launder is a pet aversion of mine. I would go a block out of my way to avoid its use. It seems to belong to a coarse, common sort of people. It has such a harsh sound to me that hearing it always makes me wince, as when chalk squeaks on the blackboard.

Whether this antipathy and other verbal antipathies existed in the mind of Professor Hill, I do not know, but I suspect they did. I submit, at any rate, that upon such a hypothesis we may easily explain the verbal taboos promulgated by him and by the other authorities to whom I have referred in the course of this paper.

What I have been trying to say may be summarized as follows:

In certain books that have appeared within the last quarter of a century, attempts have been made to place a ban or prohibition upon well-known and much-used English words and phrases. These prohibitions, which may be termed verbal taboos from their resemblance to the taboos of aboriginal tribes, are the outcome of antipathies formed in early years while the individual is acquiring

command of speech. Such antipathies being due to the associations which naturally occur in the formation of the speech-habit are common to all persons; but in the case of most of us they are checked or repressed by a sense of deference to the feelings of others in the community. There are persons, however, in each generation who, because they are exceptionally self-assertive and aggressive in matters of language, do not hesitate to impose their personal antipathies upon their neighbors. It is from these persons that verbal taboos proceed.

Another fact which such a study makes clear is the extreme complexity of the influences which give to words their accepted meanings. Words do not spring up in the mind with their dictionary values stamped upon them. Rather they are like irregular fragments torn out of the texture of our daily experience, trailing behind them threads of various lengths and various colors. At first each individual's mental concept of a word is as different from every other individual's as his experience is different. But the recurrence of the word in a variety of contexts and under varying conditions wears off the appendages and reduces the fragment to a conventional size and shape. If, however, in a particular case, some remnant of the old, misshapen context is tough, or escapes somehow the process of attrition, then the meaning of the word for this person is different from its meaning for others, and the result may be an aversion to it.

If, for any reason, the individual aversions coincide, the word, or some meaning of the word, becomes obsolescent. This seems to have happened in the case of the word **victuals**.¹ An American dictionary-maker, intent upon reflecting current usage, would perhaps be justified in noting that the word victuals is *verbum ingratum* to a considerable number of readers, or at least that it shows an inclination toward the meaning "uninviting food in unattractive surroundings." I venture the opinion that to the majority of dictionary-users, such an entry would occasion no surprise.

¹ The singular, victual, is not only inoffensive but even poetically congenial. In *Geraint and Enid* Tennyson uses it four times in close succession with fine effect, especially in the lines,

There came a fair-hair'd youth, that in his hand
Bore victual for the mowers.